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Pharmacological Interventions in Neurodegenerative Disorders

Julie Gaylord*

Department of Pharmacy, Medical University, New York, United States

Perspective

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***For Correspondence:** Julie Gaylord, Department of Pharmacy, Medical University, New York, United States;
E-mail: Juliegaylord@gmail.com

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DESCRIPTION

Neurodegenerative disorders, including Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease and Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), are characterized by the progressive degeneration of neurons in the central nervous system, leading to functional impairments. These disorders significantly impact the quality of life of affected individuals, and as the global population ages, the prevalence of these diseases is expected to increase. Despite extensive research, effective disease-modifying therapies for neurodegenerative disorders remain limited. However, pharmacological interventions have made strides in managing symptoms and slowing disease progression. This article examines the pharmacological approaches used to treat neurodegenerative disorders, focusing on their mechanisms, efficacy, and challenges.

Alzheimer's Disease (AD) is the most common form of dementia, marked by cognitive decline, memory loss, and behavioral changes. It is characterized by the accumulation of amyloid-beta plaques and neurofibrillary tangles made up of tau protein. These pathological features disrupt neuronal function and connectivity. The underlying neurochemical changes involve the cholinergic system, with reduced acetylcholine levels contributing to cognitive dysfunction.

The primary pharmacological treatment for AD is the use of cholinesterase inhibitors, such as donepezil, rivastigmine and galantamine. These drugs work by inhibiting the enzyme acetylcholinesterase, which breaks down acetylcholine, thereby increasing its availability in the brain. By enhancing cholinergic neurotransmission, cholinesterase inhibitors improve cognitive function and temporarily stabilize symptoms, especially in the mild to moderate stages of AD.

Another class of drugs used in AD is glutamate regulators. Memantine, an NMDA receptor antagonist, is prescribed for moderate to severe AD. It works by blocking excessive glutamate activity, which can lead to neuronal toxicity and excitotoxicity. By regulating glutamate, memantine helps protect neurons and may improve symptoms related to cognition, behavior, and daily functioning.

While these treatments can provide symptomatic relief, they do not address the underlying pathological processes of AD, such as amyloid-beta plaque accumulation or tau pathology. As a result, current therapies offer limited efficacy, and researchers are exploring more targeted pharmacological strategies, such as anti-amyloid therapies and tau-targeting drugs.

Huntington's Disease (HD) is a genetic neurodegenerative disorder caused by an expanded CAG repeat in the HTT gene, leading to the production of a mutant huntingtin protein that causes neuronal toxicity. The disease leads to progressive motor dysfunction, cognitive decline, and psychiatric symptoms, with motor symptoms resembling those of Parkinson's disease and other movement disorders.

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Research into gene-targeted therapies for HD is ongoing, with strategies including gene silencing techniques and approaches aimed at modifying the production of mutant huntingtin protein. While still in early stages, these therapies offer hope for future disease-modifying treatments.

Despite advances in pharmacological therapies, the treatment landscape for neurodegenerative disorders remains challenging. Current therapies predominantly focus on symptom management rather than disease modification. The need for disease-modifying treatments that can slow or halt the progression of neurodegenerative diseases is urgent.

Emerging therapies such as gene editing, stem cell-based treatments and small molecule inhibitors targeting specific disease pathways hold great potential. For instance, antisense oligonucleotides, which can selectively silence mutant genes in conditions like ALS and Huntington's disease, are showing promise in preclinical and early clinical trials. Additionally, neuroprotective agents that target inflammation, oxidative stress and protein aggregation are under investigation for diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

CONCLUSION

Pharmacological interventions in neurodegenerative disorders have made significant strides in managing symptoms and improving the quality of life for patients. However, challenges remain in finding effective disease-modifying therapies. As research continues into the underlying genetic and molecular mechanisms of these diseases, novel pharmacological approaches hold the potential to slow disease progression and ultimately provide curative treatments. In the future, personalized medicine, based on individual genetic profiles and disease mechanisms, may offer the most effective strategies for managing neurodegenerative disorders.